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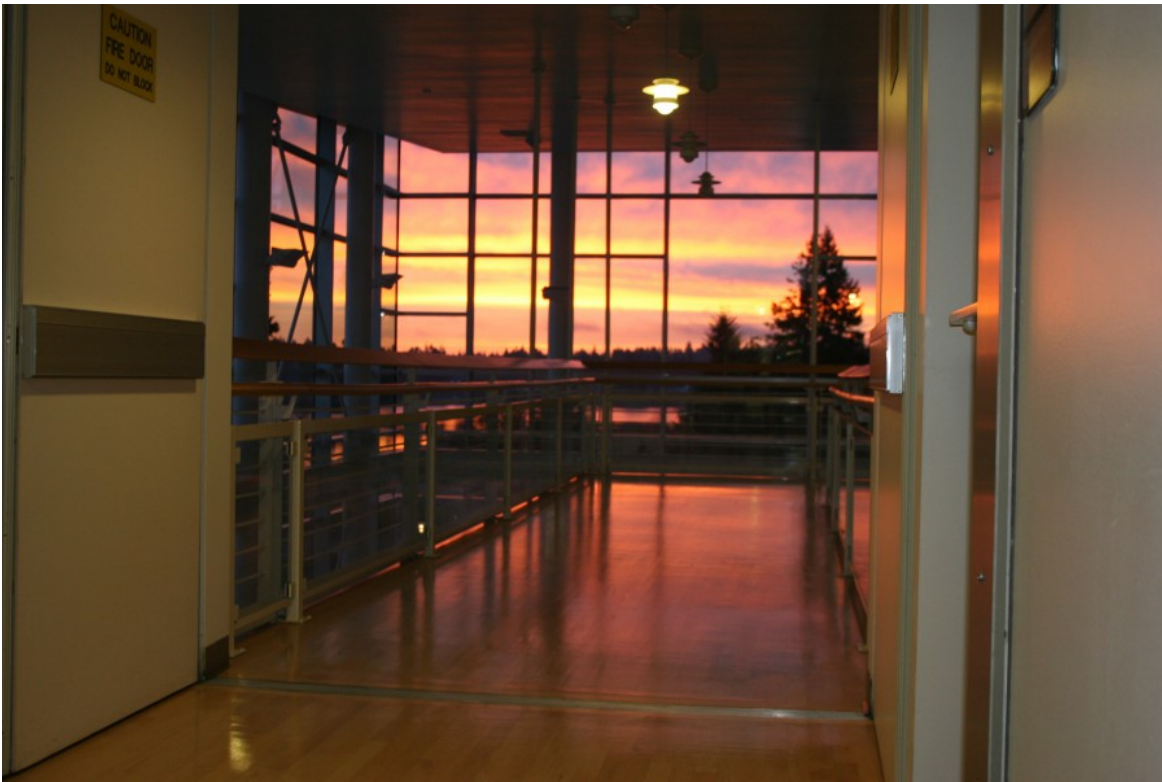
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Shine Some Light on the Winter Blues with Navy Medicine

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By Douglas H Stutz, Naval Hospital Bremerton Public Affairs



Got the wintertime blues? **You're not alone.**

Navy Medicine attests there are ways to shine some light to prevent and cope with the dark days of winter.

According to Dr. Anthony Hwang, Naval Hospital Bremerton Clinical Psychologist assigned to the Mental Health Department, when a person's individual mood is normally okay, but come fall and winter is consistently or predominantly low, they could be experiencing the winter blues which affects approximately 10-20 percent of the U.S. population.

Then there is another five percent of the population that suffer from Major Depressive Disorder (MDD) with a seasonal pattern, a condition once referred to as Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD).

"There is a difference between being down and experiencing MDD with a seasonal pattern. The pattern is consistent and research indicates it's tied to light, or lack thereof. The further from the equator during the winter months, the more prevalent the condition can be. There can be a reluctance to admit its existence and there are certainly a lot of different specifiers for MDD, but we know it's there and there are ways to deal with it," said Hwang.

Hwang notes that the warning indicators – low energy, fatigue, tiredness, low mood, decrease in activity, difficulty concentrating – are usually there, and the more people are aware of them then they can prevent and fight the winter blues.

Other possible signs of an onset of the winter blues are feeling apathy; being sad most of the day, nearly every day; pessimistic attitude; excessive sleep and/or poor sleep; irritability; changes in appetite; and change in weight.

"I have experienced it. Low vitamin D and lack of sunshine made me down in the dumps. I also talked to several others and they mentioned that they had the same symptoms of having a gloomy feeling. Then when the rains stopped, the clouds were gone and the sun came back out, I felt like a new person," said

Lt. Shawn Redmon, Navy Chaplain Corps attached to NHB's Pastoral Care Department.

If there are concentration problems, feelings of worthlessness or excessive or inappropriate guilt, psychomotor agitation or retardation or recurrent thoughts of death, that's when someone needs to be completely honest with themselves and seek help.

"If someone is experiencing suicidal thoughts, self-harm behaviors, violent tendencies or unhealthy behaviors involving alcohol and/or other drugs, seek help. At the very least, consult," said Hwang, explaining that alcohol is a stimulant and a depressant and that stimulant sensation goes away quickly.

Beneficiaries can contact their Medical Home Port team, Mental Health and Pastoral Care departments for consult assistance.

"People turn to a number of ways to detach and alcohol is a big contributor. It's obviously not a good way to go to deal with any issue. Being active and adventurous is much more fulfilling," Hwang added.

Awareness is key in handling personal mental wellness.

"Prevention is always better than having to do intervention. Recognizing the signs early helps as does knowing personal habits and patterns," stressed Hwang, citing that a person's attitude is vital in dealing in trying to shake the doldrums.

"Attitude is huge," continued Hwang. "When trying to control what we can't, like the weather, we don't like it. We can get resistant. Changing your attitude makes a difference. That's always easier said than done, yet there are options. Changing the way we think and learning to adapt, being flexible and trying new things is great. The paradox of depression is that it perpetuates itself. We have to force ourselves, even starting small and learning to build from that. Learning something new can be good."

An underlying premise to MDD is that a person's moods can be tied directly to the weather, with those moods impacting their habits

"Some stop doing what they enjoy because of winter conditions. They become a lot more sedentary, don't socialize as much, and resist even getting out," said Hwang.

There are risk factors to also be aware of, states Hwang, such as being younger and female; living/working far up north; a family or personal history of mental health issues; having a hectic, chaotic work schedule; and limited light exposure.

"Light is a good remedy to prevent winter blues. This may sound silly to some, but light can make a huge difference. Keep your home bright during the day, tone down at night. Having multiple light sources such as overhead and lamp light, is helpful," shared Hwang, adding that even reading, listening to music, watching TV in a dim, dark, gloomy place can lower a person's mood.

Then there is dealing with annual, traditional events from Thanksgiving to New Year. There are some who undergo a post-holiday 'letdown.' "There can be a feeling like a 'letdown' after the holidays are over that is associated with a dip in mood. When that is experienced, little things we normally do fall off. We miss exercising, talking to friends, getting out. That's when the things that normally keep us going in other seasons are needed and are just as important if not more so," Hwang said.

December 22 was the Winter Solstice, the shortest day for 2015. Also the longest night. A number of cultures around the world celebrate the event, but if viewing the aurora borealis (northern lights) in Alaska or visiting Stonehenge in England are not options, a person can simply make their own tradition

in conjunction with the season and the climate.

“Where we live, there’s going to be winter and there’s going to be weather conditions that are not ideal. That’s just a fact of life. I have decided to embrace it. I hike in the mountains, I run in the local trails, I enjoy the abundance of beauty that this part of our country has to offer. Yes it rains, and the climate gives us the green forests and snow covered mountains. I love it,” Redmon said.

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